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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

AUGUST 1, 1866.

CHURCH CHOIR FESTIVALS.

BY HENRY C. LUNN.

To those who, like ourselves, watch with pleasure the growing love for sacred music in England, the progress of the many Choral Societies established since the works of our best composers have been brought within the means of the humblest worshippers of art have a special interest; and we always receive the periodical records of their doings with the utmost satisfaction. The local influence which may be exercised by an organist or an enthusiastic amateur, cannot be too strongly insisted upon; and where such exertions have been crowned with results honourable alike to themselves and the art, we are only too happy to aid in giving publicity to the names of men who have laboured nobly and disinterestedly in so good a work. To trace great effects from small beginnings, there can be little doubt that at the time when music ceased to be a luxury in England, persons began to perceive that, however rare might be the gift of a voice such as should make a fortune for its owner, the faculty of taking a part in choral works was given to the many; and the price of the standard compositions being now reckoned by pence instead of shillings, small bodies of vocalists grew up in towns, and even villages, where the practice of sacred music had been hitherto confined to the drawing of a few charity-children, not singing, but endeavouring to sing, in unison during the usual Sunday service in the Parish church. These unfortunate representatives of the choral portion of the worship, who were driven periodically to and from the organ-loft—and who indeed came to be looked upon as the natural victims of the organist—had nothing to recommend them save their strength of lungs, which unfortunately seemed always in advance of their years; and it could scarcely be expected, therefore, that as music became carefully cultivated in the homes of the intelligent members of the congregation during the week, their ears could tolerate anything so insufferably barbarous in the church on a Sunday. It was felt by all who were not prejudiced beyond the capacity of thinking, that bad music could only be acceptable from those who knew no better; and that although ignorant worship was better than none at all, the duty of all who had developed their mental powers was to use those powers, in their highest and most intellectual form, to the praise and glory of Him from whom these inestimable gifts had been received. From this time, therefore, almost insensibly, a movement to improve sacred music has been steadily advancing; and the number of Church Choral Festivals which have lately taken place may be accepted as a proof how earnest has been the work. It would be almost impossible in our limited space to chronicle one half of these gatherings—occurring as they have even in places where such musical demonstrations could be least expected—but some of the most important deserve to be recorded, not only on account of the numbers which have taken part in the choir, but for the zeal shown in the cause by those who have the power and influence to promote its healthy progress.

The seventh Annual Festival of the Peterborough Choral Association took place in the Cathedral on the 5th ult. Great care had been bestowed upon all the arrangements connected with this gathering; and too much praise cannot be given to all who had thus voluntarily laboured to produce so satisfactory a result. In the book containing the music performed on the occasion the plainest directions had been given to the singers; and although opinions might differ as to the advisability of thus apportioning the several parts of the service—especially where all the singers, with the exception of the Cathedral Choir, were made to sing the melody of the Responses—there can be no doubt that the strict observance of these regulations was of the utmost importance, as even the congregation were enjoined to sing only that part assigned to the melodists. The effect of the Processional Hymn (by S. Webbe) was somewhat marred by the want of steadiness in the singers; but as the choirs advanced along the nave, they gradually got more together, and when the organ commenced, the hymn—although scarcely an attractive one—was heard to the utmost advantage. Whilst a large body of vocalists remained in the nave, their voices were well distributed throughout the building; but when we saw the *Decani* singers pass into the south transept, and the *Cantoris* singers into the north, we trembled for the effect of even so large a body of voices utterly cut off from the majority of the congregation. The result proved that our fears were not groundless; for at any period of the service, had a stranger entered the cathedral he would scarcely have imagined that he was listening to anything beyond the ordinary every-day service, so much was the sound of upwards of a thousand voices confined within a narrow circle of the building. The chants were Battishill in G, Walmisley in D, J. Barnby in B minor, and Hayes in D, the last three being used for the Psalms, and the first for the *Venite*. These were all well given, the trebles especially being remarkable for just intonation throughout. The Rev. F. Smith's chants in F and D minor were extremely effective for the *Te Deum*; as was also Dr. S. Elvey's chant in B flat, which was chosen for the *Jubilate*. Dr. Steggall's anthem, "Remember now thy Creator," is not only the work of a musician, but of one imbued with a true ecclesiastical feeling. We should perhaps have preferred that for a Festival anthem something more cheerful should have been chosen; but containing no great difficulties of execution, it was perhaps on this account, as well as on its own intrinsic merits, that it had been selected. The first movement is by far the best, not only in subject, but in treatment. An effective and bold setting of the words "vanity of vanities" is somewhat weakened by the passage, where the basses commence the subject on A, B natural, producing two exceedingly unpleasant six-fours—E, A, C,—F, B $\sharp$, D. A good effect was got by making all the voices sing the melody at the conclusion; as the subject having been already heard fully harmonized, we fancy that at the final close a single voice would sound somewhat weak. The hymn before the sermon, composed for the Association by Arthur H. Brown, is smooth and agreeably harmonized, with the exception of the F sharp, C sharp, followed by G natural, B, after the third double bar, which caused an unpleasant sensation every time it occurred. The harmonies of these hymns, where the same passages are so continually repeated, should be of the very purest kind. That

sung after the sermon, the words written for the Association by the Rev. E. H. Plumptre, was set to a melody taken, as it is stated in the book, from Mr. S. Baring Gould's "Iceland," and skilfully harmonized by Mr. W. H. Monk. No praise can be too great for the manner in which the sermon was preached by the Bishop of St. Andrew's (the Right Rev. Charles Wordsworth); nor must we omit to mention the earnest and eloquent exhortation to all who loved music that they would exert themselves to promote the spread of so important an agent in the true worship of the Church whenever and wherever it was within their power.

The afternoon service commenced with a Processional Hymn effectively composed by Mr. W. H. Monk, to some words by the Rev. E. H. Plumptre, and sung with much precision. The Gregorian chants to which the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* were sung were perhaps scarcely attractive enough to uphold the cause of the Gregorianists against their opponents; although the second one contained some beautiful points in the harmony, and moreover made us *feel* the words to which they were united, a point too often lost sight of, and lately used as a powerful argument by those who would on this account abolish our system of chanting altogether. The anthem, "I was glad when they said unto me," was composed for the occasion by the Rev. E. B. Whyley; and considering his indefatigable exertions in connection with this festival, and his arduous duties as Head Master of the King's School, it seems astonishing that he should find time to devote to the composition of a work to which he must not only bring zeal and love for the task, but experience and training, only to be acquired by an intimate knowledge and long study of the forms of ecclesiastical writing. That he has fully succeeded in producing an anthem of a high character we cannot conscientiously affirm; but that it contains points of the utmost interest is unquestionable. The opening subject is full of vigour; and there are many instances of fugal writing throughout the composition which show at least an ambition to persevere in a good school. We understand that the anthem was written against time; and as it is published, and may probably be performed by other choirs, it would be good that it should be subjected to a careful revision, so that the composer (to whom all honour is due for so promptly supplying the place of an anthem which was expected for the occasion) should at least do himself the justice that he deserves. A well written hymn by Mr. W. H. Monk, "The day is gently sinking to a close," concluded the afternoon service.

To all those who laboured so earnestly to give effect to this Festival—especially the Rev. Charles Daymond, who conducted the choir, and the Rev. E. B. Whyley, who superintended the internal arrangements of the Cathedral—it must have been extremely gratifying to feel how thoroughly they had been repaid for their exertions; but there can be no doubt that those who can effectually remove themselves from local influence must feel that unless an Annual Festival pre-suppose an annual progress, little can be done towards the real improvement of church choirs. A mere demonstration is very apt to blind even the most intelligent looker-on to the abstract merits of the cause itself; and for the moment, therefore, casting aside the beautiful appearance of the Cathedral-green, where the several choirs with their banners were assembled at an early hour, the

kind and considerate attention bestowed by those in authority upon all who had come from the metropolis to report upon the day's proceedings—rendering their duty a pleasure—and the very excellent sermon which seemed to spring spontaneously from the heart of the Rev. Charles Wordsworth—we are earnestly desirous of calmly considering how this Peterborough gathering may gradually aspire to a high place amongst the many minor musical festivals of the day. In the first place we feel that a vigorous and thoroughly musical training is absolutely necessary when a number of vocalists are to be brought together for a festival performance in a large Cathedral. Before this can be effected all must agree that, although the congregation need not be shut out of their legitimate share in the musical service, it is only those who have been duly educated to whom the principal and responsible parts should be assigned. There must no longer be a conductor (who, even now, feels that, to a certain extent, he is admitted on sufferance) timidly beating the time from the pulpit; but a duly qualified musician must stand in front of the choir, and direct the music with a precision and intelligence which alone can ensure a perfect rendering of the service. The compositions to be performed must be chosen by those most competent to judge; and the local clergy should have no influence save the power of advising and discussing with those accustomed to a Cathedral service as to the best means of exhibiting the progress of the choirs, and ensuring a performance as perfect as existing circumstances will allow. With the authorities at Peterborough we need scarcely say that the pursuance of a line of conduct like this would be a labour of love; and emboldened by this assurance, we would gently suggest that something should be done before the next Festival with that intolerable organ; and, although we believe that the experiment was fairly worth trying, we are of opinion that whatever the singers may think themselves, the congregation would be delighted to find that next year the voices were not to be stifled in the transepts.

The interest of our subject has led us to speak somewhat at length upon the Peterborough Choir Festival; but we cannot take leave of it without saying that the whole of the arrangements—including a dinner provided for 200 visitors, and 1,200 singers—were admirably conducted; nor can we deny ourselves the pleasure of publicly thanking the Rev. E. B. Whyley for the extreme courtesy and attention which we received, even at a time when his highly responsible duties pressed most heavily upon him.

The Festival which was held in the Cathedral of Salisbury on the 30th of May, was in every respect entitled to a lengthened notice; but the number of these gatherings is now so rapidly increasing that it is impossible to do full justice to all. The effect of the Processional Hymn (Handel's 148th) was remarkably fine, especially as it was heard gradually approaching the Cathedral door; and indeed after the choirs had entered the building, no person could remain unmoved by the scene, either as appealing to the ear or the eye—the religious feeling deepening as the voices were strengthened by those already in the Cathedral. The chants were well sung, but with perhaps too much strength where the words especially required the tone to be subdued. The *Te Deum* was by Dr. Steggall; and for the *Benedictus*, a beautiful single chant of Purcell was chosen. The

anthems "Lift up your heads," from the *Messiah*, and the Rev. Sir Frederick A. Gore Ouseley's "From the rising of the sun," went exceedingly well; the former obtaining an additional amount of steadiness from the fact of Mr. W. P. Aylward undertaking the office of conductor. The beautiful chorale, harmonized by Mendelssohn in *St. Paul*, was given before the sermon; and the Processional Hymn at the conclusion of the service was a smoothly written, but not remarkable, one, entitled "Oriël" in the "Salisbury Hymn-book." The sermon was excellent, and preached with so distinct an articulation by the Very Rev. Harvey Goodwin, Dean of Ely, as to be audible throughout the entire building.

The service in the afternoon was performed by the Cathedral choir, although an earnest appeal was made for the assistance of those choirs which had not left Salisbury at the conclusion of the morning service. No doubt this assistance would have been readily given, but the late hour at which the service commenced in the morning—owing to the want of punctuality of a train on the South Western railway—compelled all the singers who had distances to travel to leave immediately after dinner, which we may here say was provided in two tents erected on a lawn. The two anthems were well selected—Greene's "O sing unto the Lord," and Dr. S. S. Wesley's "Blessed be the God and Father." The latter of these compositions—a noble piece of solid ecclesiastical writing—was admirably given; but the solo parts in Greene's anthem showed sadly the want of careful rehearsal. The Processional Hymns were the same as in the morning; and the Chants to the Psalms were Earle in B flat, and Hopkins in F. The *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis*, Elvey in A. The services of Mr. J. E. Richardson, organist of the Cathedral, must not be passed over without acknowledgment; and the exertions of the Rev. W. Percival Ward, Diocesan Secretary, and the Rev. G. Noel Freeling, who directed the rehearsals, cannot be too highly appreciated by all who know how laborious are the duties attendant upon these choral gatherings.

On the 31st May the Annual Festival of the Diocesan Choral Association of Canterbury took place in the Cathedral. There was no procession into the building, but the choirs entered in good order from the Chapter House, and took their appointed seats. Considering the number of voices (800) there was no unduly loud singing, which is often the fault in these gatherings. The time, given by the Precentor, was well observed; and the recitation of the words in chanting fairly distinct; and considering the length of the "Choir," and the difficulty of at all times hearing the organ, the intonation was excellent. Many portions of the service were extremely impressive, but the anthem, "How goodly are thy tents" (Ouseley), first sung by the Cathedral Choir, and repeated by the combined choirs, was generally considered the best piece performed during the morning. The Bishop of Oxford preached an excellent sermon, especially addressed to the choir and all who desired the promotion of church music. At the afternoon service the Psalms were chanted to Gregorian tones in unison, the *Glorias* in harmony, but of the poorest kind. The anthem was "The Heavens are telling," from the *Creation*, which, although not perhaps done full justice to, was tolerably steady, considering the material of which most choirs are formed. The selection of hymn tunes, both in the morning and

evening, was not particularly good; the second one in the morning was the best, the old 104th; the first was a melody from the old Salisbury Hymnal. The Dean gave a few parting words to the choirs before the last hymn; and then the vast congregation moved away from the choir through the nave, the banners mingling here and there with the crowd, and presenting a most gay and animated scene. Thus ended the fifth and most successful of the Festivals yet held by the Diocesan Choral Union, the brief record of which would be incomplete were we not to mention the praiseworthy exertions of the Rev. H. L. Jenner (who conducted the choir), and the admirable organ playing of Mr. T. E. Jones, who went through the service with his usual care and judgment, although, as mere historians, we are bound to record that something was perceptibly wrong at the commencement of the *Magnificat* which could only be laid to his charge.

We should have been glad to give a detailed account of the Festival of the Frodsham Deanery Choral Association, which took place in the Parish Church of Witton, Northwich, on the 5th June; but the reports of many similar gatherings crowd upon us so that we cannot find a place for all, although our good wishes are earnestly with them. We may say, however, that at this Festival the number of voices amounted to 403; and that the whole of the service was executed in a most praiseworthy manner, the associated choirs evincing unmistakably the effects of the careful training bestowed upon them by their preceptor, Mr. Towers. At this year's gathering, too, we must remark that an anthem has been added to the service, a step most certainly in the right direction; and we trust that on the next occasion a somewhat more elaborate composition may be selected, so that improvement as well as zeal may be shown by the choir.

Besides those mentioned in our last number, Choral Festivals have been lately given, or are to be given, at Steventon, Turvey, Windsor, Rochford, Barnstaple (North Devon Choral Union), Appleby, Weybridge, East Retford, Portishead, Norwich, Llandaff Cathedral, and many other places which our space precludes us even from mentioning. At all these meetings the introduction of a higher class of music than has hitherto prevailed is rather the rule than the exception; and we have every hope, now that public attention has been directed to the subject, that a thorough system of musical training will be insisted upon wherever (even by travelling choir-masters) it can be obtained; and that the resident clergy who are favourable to the movement will unflinchingly insist upon the necessity of placing the selection of the music and the direction of the choir in the hands of those who have proved their undoubted right to receive so important a trust.

HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE.

The production of Mozart's comic Opera, *Il Seraglio*, will add one more to the debts of gratitude which all true artists must acknowledge due to the manager of this establishment; for as in a pecuniary point of view even the most sanguine enthusiast could scarcely dream that such works as Glück's *Iphigenia*, or Cherubini's *Medea* could be successful; so must even the most devoted Mozart lover acknowledge that the pure and unexciting music of the *Seraglio* would scarcely fill the boxes and stalls for more than two or three nights of the season. Written for voices of such extraordinary compass, another reason is evident why this Opera could never hold its place as one of the stock works of the lyric stage; for we need scarcely say how difficult it is to find Soprano voices with a compass ranging from E in *Alt* to B below the staff, or Basses extending from D below the staff to F above. The Overture is charming, and instrumented with that care which distinguishes all